HEIMER CARLSON
Chick Sexer for 55 Years
June 16, 1989
Petaluma, California

My father was Hjalmer Carlson, who came over in 1889 from Southern Sweden, Tingsryd, when he was 19. He worked in the woods in Wisconsin and Minnesota with other Swedes. When he got his first check they asked him his name. When he told them, they said we will call you Elmer.

He later put up windmills in the Dakotas and then he had a grocery store in Virginia City, Minnesota. When the store burned down, he headed for San Francisco. His favorite saying was not "to hell with it", but "to grass with it".

He took a trip to Sweden about 1914, brought my mother, Edla, back with him and they were married in San Jose in 1914.

My Dad had a knack for carpentry. He was the contractor for Lowell High School in San Francisco. He would not let us mess with his tools. I was three years old when we moved to Petaluma in 1918 from San Francisco. He continued at his trade in San Francisco until 1925, when he moved to Petaluma permanently.

Our place was on the old 101 highway. We had property on both sides of the highway. The address now is 4685 Petaluma Blvd North. Some of my first earnings from the chick sexing went into paying off the mortgage. My parents had been able to only make the interest payments. There were mostly apple orchards where we lived, and two apple driers in our neighborhood.

My father built the brooder house and three chicken houses and got in the chicken business in 1920. When he planted kale for the chickens, the plants were in straight lines both ways. We went out of the chicken business in about 1935, and then raised bronze turkeys until 1945. We had a turkey breeding flock and sold hatching eggs to Poehlamnn hatchery. Also, raised 500 to 1000 turkeys for Thanksgiving and Christmas market and retailed most of them on the ranch, either alive or New York dressed.

I graduated from Petaluma High School in 1933 (depression years). I worked on a dairy ranch for one month, earned a dollar a day and room and board. Then I stayed on our chicken ranch for over a year (no work available), but we raised our own vegetables, had eggs, chickens and a cow for milk so obviously we were well off as far as food was concerned. No dollars.

In the fall of 1934 my high school agriculture teacher, W. H. Van Dyke, stopped by and said the hatcheries in Petaluma had started a chick sexing school (had been going for 2 weeks) and if I was interested he said Poehlmann hatchery wanted to sponsor another student, and said he could get me in if I was interested. Indeed I was. My last year in our aggie class we heard the Japanese were able to sex baby chicks with a good degree of accuracy. (It fascinated me)

On January 4, 1941, I married Jean Dye (born in Petaluma). Our children are Gary (a veterinarian at Davis, where he teaches) and Janet Althouse of Marino Del Rey. Jean's father had a restaurant on Washington Street, near the bridge, called Joe Dye's Restaurant. Men from the mills ate there. She studied nursing at the old Franklin Hospital in San Francisco.

Chick Sexing

My name in Heimer Carlson and I have sexed chicks for 55 years. The following is a brief history of chick sexing from 1934-1989.

First, a brief introduction on how the art of sexing baby chicks got started. In Japan, a Dr. Masui first discovered the eminence (the organ) on male chickens in 1925. By handling older birds and gradually handling younger birds until finally they were able to discern the sex of day old chicks. This was reported to the World Poultry Congress 1927 in Ottawa, Canada.

The Japan chick sexing association was organized early in 1930. The first examination for a license was in May 1931. In 1932, a plan was approved to send sexors overseas from Japan.

In 1933 Yogo gave a demonstration in British Columbia. In 1933 at the National Poultry Congress held in Chicago, Yogo, along with four other sexors from Japan, demonstrated the art of chick sexing.

Hatchery men from Petaluma, the world's egg basket at that time, witnessed this demonstration and were impressed. They had Yogo come to Petaluma and had him sex chicks for some of our larger hatcheries, who then proceeded to raise these sexed chicks, and indeed the accuracy of chick sexing was a proven fact.

The first chick sexing school was held in British Columbia in late 1933 or early 1934. Students from Washington went over daily and learned how to sex chicks. Then in early 1934, they held two sexing schools, one in Bellingham, Washington, and another at Kent,Washington.

In 1934, the leading hatcheries and hatcherymen from Petaluma contacted the Americans who had learned chick sexing in Canada and in Washington to come to Petaluma in the fall of 1934 and conduct a chick sexing school. The hatcheries sponsoring this school and the hatcherymen were:

Poehlmann Hatchery	Max Poehlmann
	Nat Thompson
Must Hatch	Leo Bourke
Sales	Paul Sales
Pioneer	Eric Nisson
Penngrove	Bill McCarter
White	J. L. White
Bihn	Bihn family

Classes were conducted in the Must Hatch Hatchery starting in September and on into December 1934. Each hatchery furnished their weekly quotas of chicks for the students to learn on. Classes were held five days a week. We first watched our instructors and gradually learned how to handle the chicks so as not to injure them, and then gradually to manipulate so one could invert the vent of the chick to determine pullet or cockerel. We were looking for an eminence the size of 1/2 a pinhead.

It took three months, five days a week, to attain the necessary expertise at chick sexing. We worked under intense lights, 200 and 300 watts. There were about 24 students and 15 passed the test held in December 1934 at the Must Hatch Hatchery. As this was the first chick sexing school held in California and we were the first check sexors in California, our degree of accuracy was not so demanding. We guarenteed the hatchery 92%. and they guaranteed the poultrymen 90%. Professor Bill Newlan from U.C. Berkeley conducted the exam. We sexed 100 chicks each and he posted them by performing an autopsy to determine our accuracy. One student had 100% and several 99%.

It did not take the hatcheries long to raise the accuracy to 95% and then to 98%. In later years a person's accuracy needed to be 99%.

I sexed my first chick for pay in December 1934 and my last at a local hatchery, H&N, March 18, 1989 on the last chicks hatched in Petaluma. I never dreamed I would outlast the hatcheries here in Petaluma. I was the last working chick sexor from the original group.

Poehlmann hatchery was my sponsor and my main account. I also took care of other hatcheries in this and other areas: A.A, Vestal, Co-op, Harold Hardin, Guthrie, Mitchell Hawke, Sonoma: Wilson, Diamond, Cliff. U.C. Berkeley and then at Davis. (Dansing, Beattie, Lowe - Sacramento area)

Poehlmann also hatched turkeys. I taught myself to sex turkeys. First you could not see any difference as to which was a hen or a tom. Second year, I noticed a slight difference. Third year I could sex turkeys. I sexed turkeys at Nicholas in Sonoma for 40 years.

My last 25 years I sexed chicks for H&N as well as other hatcheries.

I sexed chicks for Dansing of Rio Linda from 1935 to early 40's. I sexed turkeys at Elverta, for Beattie as well as several other hatcheries in that area during the 2nd World War years. U.C. Berkeley had a hatchery up Strawberry Canyon and they moved the hatchery to U.C. Davis.

Due to sexing chicks for various hatcheries for about 55 years, I had to keep records of my jobs; amount of chicks sexed at each place so I could keep track of being paid. I have kept a diary book for each year, each hatchery and the date and the amount of chicks or turkeys poults sexed. The total amounts to some 56 million chicks and turkey poults.

We were always paid as piece workers. It was supposed to be 100 in a box, straight run from the incubatory, and were were paid by the chick. In the early days, it was 1/2 cent a chick; a little over 2 cents a chick at the last.

At first, it was seasonal work, just in the spring, February, March and April. Now it is year around.

A couple of amusing things that occured. The first year sexing chicks for Mitchell Hatchery of Calistoga. I would meet the hatchery truck load of chicks at the farm, where the chicks were delivered and proceed to sex chicks in the kitchen or dining room table, garage, brooder house, etc. The Mitchell's reason: most chicks went out straight run and they did not want any customer receiving straight run that happened to have more roosters than pullets to figure they were putting excess cockerels in their order. Mitchells was the only one who did that.

Another story: I was a witness in the small claims court. A man who ordered cockerels was suing because he didn't get 10% pullets. His logic was on pullet orders, the guarantee was 90% accuracy so he assumed he should receive 10% pullets in his cockerel order. Needless to say, he was overruled.

Chick sexing made big changes in the poultry business as now poultry farmer could raise all pullets, thus have double the amount of laying hens. It was well established by the time World War II started.

Turkey raisers also found benefits raising hens and toms separately. The hens being smaller than the toms benefited by not being crowded out by the large toms.

List of Chick Sexors

Original school 1934 and sponsoring hatcheries.

Sales & Bourke
Lewis Mahoney
John Carlsen
Jerry Brandt
Bob Bowman

Poehlmann
Heimer Carlson
Howard Hansen
John Schambers
Gene Johnson

Pioneer
Lloyd Brundige
Donald Meacham
Ralph Fitzpatrick

Penngrove
Einar Nielsen

Bihn
Eleaner Williams

White
Paul White
Fletcher Roberts

In 1937, a small chick sexing class was held at Sales & Bourke Hatchery by myself. I have rather a vague recollection of the students, two of whom were

Sol Gruskowitz and Al Durney

At the onset of World War II, John Carlsen and I conducted another chick sexing class in 1942, again held at Sales & Bourke. Sexors from the class of 1942 were:

Cliff Asbell, Al Cromwell, Wayne Walters, Clarence Lau and Dave Livie

Sexors who came later: some were trained by sexors from local hatchery and others trained elsewhere.

Bill Otani is the last fully employed sexor in Petaluma and is employed by Nicholas Turkey Hatchery of Sonoma, as of June 1989.

Others:

Dorothy Asbell, Bill Combs, Mildred Revelle, Carl Haderman, Ted Gabriel, Floy Casey, Vernon Dahlquist, Tom Shimazu, Don McSween, Mike Gypjas, Art Rewett, Elaine Rewett, Mat Fujitani, Su Tokunaga, Duke Murata, George Horio, Min Sagimori, Paul Mihara, Harry Kagiyama, Gilbert Hirsbayash Norman Yoritati.

No doubt some names inadvertently omitted.

Heimer Carlson, as told to Maxine Durney June 1990

At Poehlman Hatchery the deadline for the main shipment of the day was 4:40 PM. We would be sexing chicks to meet that deadline. If the hatch was slow we would call for sexers from other hatcheries to come and help us. It was important to get the chicks onto the train as soon as possible; they could live for a few days. To keep a chick for three days without food or water, is stretching it.

At the time you didn't think you'd live out the hatcheries; there were so many of them. But now they are all gone. Now there is only one hatchery left in Sonoma County, near the Napa County line, this side of Calistoga.

Well, we didn't think we'd outlive Poultry Producers. It was money in the bank, we thought. But we've outlived it.

L. W. Clark? We called him "Low Wage Clark".

I worked with your Dad, Maxine, when they had the fair, in the booth for FFA poultry. Took care of chickens that were on display, sometime after 1935. Max was judging FFA and 4H poultry. I had some good talks with your Dad.

Heimer Carlson goes for gophers

The Nemesis of pesky rodents

By ANDREW JOWERS
Correspondent

For a man who spent much of his working life peering up the tiny backsides of baby chickens, Heimer Carlson was in remarkably good spirits.

After all, he'd just passed a milestone. The 73-year Petaluma resident and retired chicken sexer had trapped his 1,000th gopher, perhaps a local record.

"I heard rumors that someone out in Two Rock got more, a long time ago," said great gopher hunter. "Maybe it's a record, maybe not. I just know that the gophers will be here long after I'm gone."

One that certainly will is Carlson's prize prey, his largest yet, almost a foot long and weighing in at 14 ounces. This gopher, four fangs bared, is stuffed and mounted, forever poised to kill an offending carrot on the living room mantle.

I REMEMBER WHEN

Jean, Carlson's wife of 49 years, doesn't know it yet, but his 1,000th victim is under the knife of the taxidermist, soon to join its kin, perhaps as rodent bookends.

Born 75 years ago in San Francisco, Carlson grew up a half-mile from his present home, high above Petaluma Boulevard North with a panoramic view of the Sonoma Mountains. The half-acre garden on his 14-acre property is a natural magnet for gophers.

"It's a good hunk of ground, but this sandy loam, the buggers just walk through it," he said.

So do moles: he's caught 400 of them. And many possums and skunks, the first of which he'll never forget, since it sprayed him full in his mouth. He has two cats, Omar and Rufus, better at catching gophers than he is, 12 sheep, and several geese and chickens.

His parents, 1918 emigres from Sweden, moved to Petaluma when Carlson was 3, buying a 10-acre apple orchard and chicken farm.

"Being an oldtimer, I kind of yen for the past," said Carlson, a stocky man with thick brown hair and a sly smile, particularly evident when talking about gophers and poultry. "I remember driving around, when Petaluma Boulevard was Highway 101, one lane each way. I had a '29 Model A. Chickens were out everywhere — big white birds with yellow combs. It was a beautiful sight."

A 1933 graduate of Petaluma High School, Carlson was strongside tackle on the school's North Bay League championship B team, for players under 140 pounds. It was a time when each community had but one high school and players wore leather helmets. Carlson, who still has his playbook and newspaper clip of the victory, meets every two years with the four remaining team members.

An advantage to living on a farm during the Depression, said Carlson, was "you had real good food. A cow for milk, a garden for vegetables, chickens for eggs. You always butchered a hog or two. You didn't have the money, but you lived real good."

Out of school, Carlson worked on a dairy for a month, making room and board and a dollar a day. When he heard of a new school opening at a local hatchery, the first school in the state that taught the new and puzzling art of chicken sexing, he jumped at the chance to enroll.

"Back then, if you had a job, you weren't particular," he said. "And I enjoyed poultry. I'd been around it all my life."

JEFF KAN LEE/PRESS DEMOCRAT

Heimer Carlson talks to his pet goose, 'Goosie.'

Over then next few months, he learned how to tell a male chick from a female chick, or pullet.

For the next 50 years, peering through a magnifier under the glare of a 300-watt bulb, he turned chicks upside down and gently pried open their anuses, looking for the protrusion half the size of a pinhead that indicated a male. Hatcheries must know which is which, because food down the gullet of a cockerel was considered food wasted. His odd job earned Carlson a 1983 spot on "Ripley's Believe It Or Not."

The chicken-sexing technique, first discovered by the Chinese many years ago, but commercially applied by the Japanese in the 1920s, looked so odd that, at first, demand for Carlson's trade was slight.

"Farmers would see what you did and they wouldn't want anyone doing that to their chickens," he said. But once its value was proved, and the sexers' accuracy reached better than 99 percent, the trade boomed, as did Petaluma's poultry industry, producing 45 million dozen eggs a year.

In the short off-season, he tested breeding hens for a then-rampant form of diarrhea, at 40 cents an hour.

"It was a deadly disease," he said. "Your little chick would croak on you."

In 1941, Carlson married Jean Dye, whose father owned Joe Dye's Restaurant downtown. They bought a place on D Street for $10,500, and moved to their present home 27 years ago.

Exempted from active duty in World War II because of his value to the food industry, particularly because many of the sexers were Japanese-Americans then in detention camps, Carlson worked at hatcheries from Petaluma to Sacramento, earning a half-cent a chick.

When he retired last year, as H&N Hatchery, Petaluma's last, closed its doors, the rate was 2 cents a chick. By then, at 800 chicks an hour, he'd sexed just over 56 million, as well as thousands of turkeys.

"I miss it, I just always enjoyed it," he said. "It seems funny saying that, but there are very few things today that you can get into and know they'll always be a job for you."

While sexing by Carlson's technique, called the vent method, is still the most common, geneticists are now breeding chickens so sex can be determined by wing length and feather color, he said.

Carlson can be so precise about his chicken count because he's a meticulous record keeper. He has diaries stretching back to 1934, with each day's count recorded. He can say how many chickens he sexed on the day Babe Ruth socked his last home run, on the day John Kennedy was shot, on the day the U.S. Embassy in Saigon was evacuated.

He also can say if he caught any gophers on those days, since he records those, too, including their size, in the same diaries.

On his best day, he caught 13 gophers, but he does such a good job of patrolling his plot he now catches only about 15 a year.

Carlson is full of tips on how to set traps, a skill frequently called upon by friends and neighbors. He knows the difference between a gopher mound and a mole mound; how to outsmart the gophers that spring the traps by kicking dirt in them; how to make sure the trap has a hair-trigger and is strong enough to "nail the big ones and the small ones, to make sure he's a goner."

Apart from protecting his garden from marauding rodents, Carlson [illegible] that his trapping appeals to th within.

"I used to hunt, and I g satisfies that instinct. Mostly, it a challenge."

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PETALUMA HISTORICAL MUSEUM
Oral History Program

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Petaluma, Ca 94952

DATE Aug 8 93

Heimar Carlson
(Interviewee)

Karen Dresner
(for the Petaluma Historical Museum)

PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
Oral History Program
Narrator Personal Information Questionnaire

Name Carlson Heimer
Last First Middle (Maiden)

Address 3737 Petaluma Blvd North

Marital status: Married ✓ Single ___ Divorced ___ Widowed ___

Birthdate June 16 - 1915 Birthplace San Francisco

Length of residence in Petaluma (or Sonoma County) 72 yrs

Education: Elementary school Cinnabar

Secondary school Petaluma High School Grad 1933

College ___ Grad ___

Other ___

Occupation(s) or former occupations(s) chick & poult Sexer
Raised Turkeys hatching eggs also Market

Travels Australia Hong Kong Japan Hawaii Alaska Sweden

Organizations, clubs Sirs

Other special interests Gardening, sheep, Geese Trap moles & gophers
Sports enthusiast.

Additional comments ___

THANK YOU!

PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
Oral History Program
Family History Questionnaire

	Name	Birthdate	Birthplace	Deceased? Date
Parents*	Elmer Carlson	Apr-25-1870	Sweden	v Feb 12-58
	Edla (Gustafsson) Carlson	Apr 3 1883	Sweden	v Dec 28-73
Brothers & Sisters	Elmer Carlson			
	Roy Carlson			
	Glen Carlson			
	Eva Carlson Bowker			deceased
Grand-parents*	Carl Monson			
	Svenson			
Spouse	Jean (Dye) Carlson			
Children	Gary Paul Carlson			
	Jane & Louise Althouse			
Grandchildren	Christine Carlson			
	Tom Carlson			
	Elizabeth Carlson			

*Please include maiden name of mother and grandmothers.

THANK YOU!